

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

North Carolina's conservation aquaculture center

Greetings and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature.

The Carolina heelsplitter mussel is one of the rarest animals in the country – with shrinking numbers found in only a handful of stream reaches across the Carolina piedmont. A conservation challenge, the mussel has declined as the piedmont, especially the area around Charlotte, has rapidly developed and streams have correspondingly degraded.

However, one glimmer of hope is found outside Marion, North Carolina, inside what appears to simply be a large storage shed. An unimpressive structure from the outside, the inside is a maze of shelves filled with tubs of water, with a complex system of piping constantly supplying each tub with mountain water. Each of those tubs of water is home to fish or mussels, many of which are among the rarest in the state. This is the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission's Conservation Aquaculture Center - a facility devoted to the propagation and rearing of rare and imperiled aquatic species.

For the Carolina heelsplitter and other critically endangered species, the center is a refuge. A place where they can be safely held, even studied, and perhaps eventually propagated in captivity for release into healthy, quality habitat. For other species, the center is a place where young can safely grow to a good size for release into the wild, as is the case with the threatened spotfin chub, a fish which the Commission is restoring to the Cheoah River.

For WNCW and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, this is Gary Peeples.